

ALICE of OLD VINCENNES

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(Continued.)

CHAPTER VII. THE MAYOR'S PARTY.

HELM was a good officer in many respects, and his patriotism was of the best; but he liked jolly company, a glass of something strong and a large share of ease. Detroit lay many miles northward across the wilderness, and the English, he thought, would scarcely come so far to attack his little post, especially now that most of the Indians in the intervening country had declared in favor of the Americans. Recently, too, the weather had been favoring him by changing from wet to dry, so that the upper Wabash and its tributaries were falling low and would soon be very difficult to navigate with large bateaux.

Very little was done to repair the stockade and dilapidated remnant of a blockhouse. There were no sufficient barracks, a mere shed in one angle serving for quarters, and the old cannon could not have been used to any effect in case of attack. As for the garrison, it was a nominal quantity, made up mostly of men who preferred hunting and fishing to the merest pretense of military duty.

Gaspard Roussillon assumed to know everything about Indian affairs and the condition of the English at Detroit. His optimistic eloquence lulled Helm to a very pleasant sense of security. Beverley was not so easy to satisfy, but his suggestions regarding military discipline and a vigorous prosecution of repairs to the blockhouse and stockade were treated with dilatory geniality by his superior officer. The soft wonder of a perfect Indian summer glorified land, river and sky. Why not dream and bask? Why not drink exhilarating toddies?

Meantime the entertainment to be given by Gaspard Roussillon occupied everybody's imagination to an unusual extent. Rene de Ronville, remembering but not heeding the doubtful success of his former attempt, went long beforehand to claim Alice as his partner, but she flatly refused him, once more reminding him of his obligations to little Adrienne Bourcier. He would not be convinced.

"You are bound to me," he said. "You promised before, you know, and the party was put off. I hold you to it. You are my partenaire and I am yours; you can't deny that."

"No, you are not my partenaire," she firmly said, then added lightly, "Fem mon partenaire, you are dead and buried as my partner at that dance."

He glowered in silence for a few moments, then said:

"It is Lieutenant Beverley, I suppose?"

She gave him a quick, contemptuous look, but turned it instantly into one of her tantalizing smiles.

"Do you imagine that?" she demanded.

"Imagine it! I know it," he said with a hot flush. "Have I no sense?"

"Precious little," she replied with a merry laugh.

"You think so?"

"Go to Father Beret, tell him everything, and then ask him what he thinks," she said in a calm, even tone, her face growing serious.

There was an awkward silence.

She had touched Rene's vulnerable spot. He was nothing if not a devout Catholic, and his conscience rooted itself in what good Father Beret had taught him.

Father Beret was the humble, self-effacing, never tiring agent of good in his community. He preached in a tender, stinging voice the sweet monotones of his creed and the sublime truths of Christ's code. He was indeed the spiritual father of his people. No wonder Rene's solemn expression changed to one of abject self-concern when the priest's name was suddenly connected with his mood. The confessional loomed up before the eyes of his conscience and his knees snatched together, spiritually if not physically.

"Now," said Alice brusquely, but with sweet and gentle firmness, "so to your fiancée, go to pretty and good Adrienne, and ask her to be your partenaire. Refresh your conscience with a noble draft of duty and make that dear little girl overjoyed with joy. Go, Rene de Ronville."

Rene felt his soul cowering, even sinking, but he fairly maintained a good face, and went away without saying another word.

"Ciel, ciel, how beautiful she is!" he thought, as he walked along the narrow street in the dusky sunshine.

"But she is not for me, not for me."

He shook himself and tried to be cheerful. In fact he hummed a creole ditty, something about "La belle Jeanette, qu'une brise mon court."

Days passed, and at last the time of the great event arrived. It was a frosty night, clear, sparkling with stars, a keen breath cutting down from the northwest. M. Roussillon, Mme. Roussillon, Alice and Lieutenant Beverley went together to the river house, whither they had been preceded by almost the entire population of Vincennes. Some fires had been built outside, the crowd proving too great for the building's capacity, as there had to

be ample space for the dancers. Merry groups hovered around the flaming logs, while within the house a fiddle sang its simple and ravishing tunes. Everybody talked and laughed; it was a lively racket of clashing voices and rhythmic feet.

When the Roussillon party arrived it attracted condensed attention. Its importance, naturally of the greatest in the assembled popular mind, was enhanced—as mathematicians would say, to the nth power—by the gown of Alice. It was resplendent indeed in the simple, unaccustomed eyes upon which it flashed with a buff silken glory. Matrons stared at it, maidens gazed with fascinated and jealous vision, men young and old let their eyes take full liberty. It was as if a queen, arrayed in a robe of state, had entered that dingy log edifice, an apparition of dashing and awe-inspiring beauty. The dancers swung together and stopped in confusion. But she, fortified by a woman's strongest bulwark, the sense of responsibility, appeared quite unconscious of herself.

Little Adrienne, hanging in blissful delight upon Rene's strong arm, felt the stir of excitement and wondered what was the matter, being too short to see over the heads of those around her.

"What is it? What is it?" she cried, lipsticking and tugging at her companion's sleeve. "Tell me, Rene; tell me, I say."

Rene was gazing in dumb admiration into which there swept a powerful anger, like a breath of flame. He recol-

lected how Alice had refused to wear that dress when he had asked her, and now she had it on. Moreover, there she stood beside Lieutenant Beverley, holding his arm, looking up into his face, smiling, speaking to him.

"I think you might tell me what has happened," said Adrienne, pointing and still pinching at his arm. "I can't see a thing, and you won't tell me."

"Oh, it's nothing," he presently answered rather fretfully. Then he stooped, lowered his voice and added: "It's Mlle. Roussillon all dressed up like a bride or something. She's got on a buff silk dress that M. Roussillon's mother had in France."

"How beautiful she must look!" cried the girl. "I wish I could see her."

Rene put a hand on each side of her slender waist and lifted her high, so that her pretty head rose above the crowding people. Alice chanced to turn her face that way just then and saw the unconventional performance. Her eyes met those of Adrienne and she gave a nod of smiling recognition. It was a rose beaming upon a gillyflower.

M. Roussillon naturally understood that all this stir and crowding to see was but another demonstration of his personal popularity. He bowed and waved a vast hand.

But the master of ceremonies called loudly for the dancers to take their places. Uncle Jason attacked his fiddle with startling energy. Those who were not to dance formed a compact double line around the wall, the shorter ones in front, the taller in the rear.

Alice and Beverley were soon in the whirl of the dance, forgetful of everything but an exhilaration stirred to its utmost by Uncle Jason's music. When their dance was ended they followed the others of their set out into the open air while a fresh stream of eager dancers poured in. Beverley insisted upon wrapping Alice in her mantle of unlined beaver skin against the searching winter breath. They did not go to the fire, but walked back and forth, chatting until their turn to dance should come again, pausing frequently to exchange pleasantries with some of the people. Curiously enough both of them had forgotten the fact that other young men would be sure to ask Alice for a dance and that more than one pretty creole lass was rightfully expecting a glady turn with the stalwart and handsome Lieutenant Beverley.

Rene de Ronville before long broke rudely into their selfish dream and led Alice into the house. This reminded Beverley of his social duty; wherefore, seeing little Adrienne Bourcier, he made a rush and secured her at a swoop from the midst of a scrambling

circle of mutually hindered young men. "Allons, ma petite!" he cried, quite in the gay tone of the occasion, and swung her lightly along with him.

It was like an eagle dancing with a linnet, or a giant with a fairy, when the big lieutenant led out the petite Adrienne, as everybody called her. The honor of Beverley's attention sat un-

appreciated on Adrienne's mind, for all her thoughts went with her eyes toward Rene and Alice. Nor was Beverley so absorbed in his partner's behalf that he ever for a moment willingly lost sight of the floating buff gown, the shining brown hair and the beautiful face, which formed, indeed, the center of attraction for all eyes.

It was some time before Beverley could again secure Alice for a dance, and he found it annoying him atrociously to see her smile sweetly on some buckskin clad lout who looked like an Indian and danced like a Parisian. He did not greatly enjoy most of his partners; they could not appeal to any side of his nature just then. Not that he at all times stood too much on his aristocratic traditions, or lacked the virile traits common to vigorous and worldly minded men, but the contrast between Alice and the other girls present was somehow an absolute bar to a democratic freedom of the sort demanded by the occasion. He met Father Beret and passed a few pleasant words with him.

"They have honored your flag, my son, I am glad to see," the priest said, pointing with a smile to where, in one corner, the banner that bore Alice's name was effectively draped.

Beverley had not noticed it before, and when he presently got possession of Alice he asked her to tell him the story of how she planted it on the fort, although he had heard it to the last detail from Father Beret just a moment ago. They stood together under its folds while she naively sketched the scene for him, even down to her picturesquely disagreeable interview with Long Hair, mention of whom led up to the story of the Indian's race with the stolen dame Jeanne of brandy under his arm on that memorable night and the subsequent services performed for him by Father Beret and her after she and Jean had found him in the mud beyond the river.

The dancing went on at a furious pace while they stood there. Now and again a youth came to claim her, but she said she was tired and begged to rest awhile, smiling so graciously upon each one that his rebuff thrilled him as if it had been the most flattering gift of tender partiality, while at the same time he suspected that it was all for Beverley.

Helm in his most jovial mood was circulating freely.

It was late when fathers and mothers in the company began to suggest adjournment. In the open lamps suspended here and there the oil was running low, and the rag wicks sputtered and winked with their yellow flames.

"Well," said M. Roussillon, coming to where Alice and Beverley stood insulated and isolated by their great delight in each other's company, "it's time to go home."

Beverley looked at his watch. It was a quarter to three!

Alice also looked at the watch, and saw engraved and enameled on its massive case the Beverley crest, but she did not know what it meant. There was something of the sort in the back of her locket, she remembered with satisfaction.

Just then there was a peculiar stir in the flagging crowd. Some one had arrived, a courreur de bois from the north. Where was the commandant? The courreur had something important for him.

Beverley heard a remark in a startled voice about the English getting ready for a descent upon the Wabash valley. This broke the charm which thrilled him and sent through his nerves the bracing shock that only a soldier can feel when a hint of coming battle reaches him.

Alice saw the flash in his face.

"Where is Captain Helm? I must see him immediately. Excuse me," he said, abruptly turning away and looking over the heads of the people. "Yonder he is; I must go to him."

The courreur de bois, Adolphe Dutremble by name, was just from the head waters of the Wabash. He was speaking to Helm when Beverley came up. M. Roussillon followed close upon the lieutenant's heels, as eager as he to know what the message amounted to; but Helm took the courreur aside, motioning Beverley to join them. M. Roussillon included himself in the conference.

After all it was but the gossip of savages that Dutremble communicated, still the purport was startling in the extreme. Governor Hamilton, so the story ran, had been organizing a large force. He was probably now on his way to the portage of the Wabash with a flotilla of bateaux, some companies of disciplined soldiers, artillery and a strong body of Indians.

Helm listened attentively to Dutremble's lively sketch, then cross-questioned him with laconic directness.

"Send Mr. Jason to me," he said to M. Roussillon, as if speaking to a servant.

The master Frenchman went promptly, recognizing Captain Helm's right to command, and sympathizing with his unpleasant military predicament if the news should prove true.

Uncle Jason came in a minute, his fiddle and bow clamped under his arm, to receive a verbal commission, which sent him with some scouts of his own choosing forthwith to the Wabash portage, or far enough to ascertain what the English commander was doing.

After the conference Beverley made haste to join Alice, but he found that she had gone home.

"Aix we'll be in if Hamilton comes down here with a good force,"

said Helm. Beverley was young, energetic, bellicose, and to him everything seemed possible; he believed in vigilance, discipline, activity, dash; he had a great faith in the efficacy of enthusiasm.

"We must organize these Frenchmen," he said. "They will make good fighters if we can once get them to act as a body. There's no time to be lost but we have time enough in which to do a great deal before Hamilton can arrive, if we go at it in earnest."

"Your theory is excellent, lieutenant, but the practice of it won't be worth much," Helm replied with perfect good nature. "I'd like to see you organize these parlyvoos. There ain't a dozen of 'em that wouldn't accept the English with open arms. I know 'em. They're good hearted, polite and all that; they'll burrah for the flag—that's easy enough—but put 'em to the test and they'll join in with the strongest side; see if they don't. Of course there are a few exceptions. There's Jason, he's all right, and I have faith in Bosseron, and Legrace, and young Ronville."

"Roussillon"—Beverley began.

"Is much of a blowhard," Helm interrupted with a laugh. "Barks loud, but his biting disposition is probably not vicious."

"He and Father Beret control the whole population at all events," said Beverley.

"Yes, and such a population!"

While joining in Captain Helm's laugh at the expense of Vincennes, Beverley took leave to indulge in a mental reservation in favor of Alice. His heart was full of her. She had surprised his nature and filled it as with a wonderful, haunting song. And yet, in his pride—and it was not a false pride, but rather a noble regard for his birthright—he vaguely realized how far she was from him, how impossible.

CHAPTER VIII.
THE DILEMMA OF CAPTAIN HELM.

ONCLE JAZON, feeling like a fish returned to the water after a long and torturing captivity in the open air, plunged into the forest with anticipations of lively adventure and made his way toward the Wea plains. It was his purpose to get a boat at the village of Outatenon and pull thence up the Wabash until he could find out what the English were doing. He chose for his companions on this dangerous expedition two expert courreurs de bois, Dutremble and Jacques Bailoup. Fifty miles up the river they fell in with some friendly Indians, well known to them all, who were returning from the portage.

The savages informed them that there were no signs of an English advance in that quarter. Some of them had been as far as the St. Joseph river and to within a short distance of Detroit without seeing a white man or hearing of any suspicious movements on the part of Hamilton. So back came Uncle Jason with his pleasing report, much disappointed that he had not been able to stir up some sort of trouble.

It was Helm's turn to laugh.

"What did I tell you?" he cried, in a jolly mood, slapping Beverley on the shoulder. "I knew mighty well that it was all a big story with nothing in it. What on earth would the English be thinking about to march an army away off down here only to capture a rotten stockade and a lot of gabbling parlyvoos?"

Beverley, while he did not feel quite as confident as his chief, was not sorry that things looked a little brighter than he had feared they would turn out to be. Secretly and without acknowledging it to himself he was delighted with the life he was living.

He began to like walking about aimlessly in the town's narrow streets, with the mud daubed cabins on either hand. This simple life under low, thatched roofs had a charm. Everybody cried cheerily, "Bon jour, monsieur, comment allez-vous?" as he went by, always accompanying the verbal salute with a graceful wave of the hand.

But it was always a glimpse of Alice that must count for everything in Beverley's reckonings, albeit he would have strenuously denied it. True, he went to Roussillon place almost every day, it being a fixed part of his well ordered habit, and had a talk with her. Sometimes, when Dame Roussillon was very busy and so quite off her guard, they read together in a novel or in certain parts of the odd volume of Montaigne. This was done more for the sweetness of disobedience than to enjoy the already familiar pages.

Now and again they repeated their fencing bout, but never with the result which followed the first. Beverley soon mastered Alice's tricks and showed her that, after all, masculine muscle is not to be discounted at its own game by even the most wonderful womanly strength and suppleness. She struggled bravely to hold her vantage ground once gained so easily, but the inevitable was not to be avoided. At last one howling winter day he disarmed her by the very trick that she had shown him. That ended the play, and they ran, shivering, into the house.

"Ah," she cried, "it isn't fair. You are so much bigger than I. You have so much longer arms, so much more weight and power. It all counts against me! You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" She was rosy with the exhilarating exercise and the biting of the frosty breeze. Her beauty gave forth a new ray.

Deep in her heart she was pleased to have him master her so superbly; but as the days passed she never said so, never gave over trying to make him feel the touch of her foil. She did not know that her eyes were getting through his guard, that her dimples were stabbing his heart to its inlaid.

"You have other advantages," he re-

plied, "which far overbalance my greater stature and stronger muscles." Then after a pause he added, "After all a girl must be a girl."

Something in his face, something in her heart, startled her so that she made a quick little move like that of a rest less bird.

"You are beautiful, and that makes my eyes and my hand uncertain," he went on. "Were I fencing with a man there would be no glamour."

He spoke in English, which he did not often do in conversation with her. It was a sign that he was somewhat wrought upon. She followed his rapid words with difficulty, but she caught from them a new note of feeling. He saw a little pale flare shoot across her face and thought she was angry.

"You should not use your dimples to distract my vision," he quickly added, with a light laugh. "It would be no worse for me to throw my hat in your face."

His attempt at levity was obviously weak. She looked straight into his eyes with the steady gaze of a simple, earnest nature shocked by a current quite strange to it. She did not understand him, and she did. Her fine intuition gathered swiftly together a hundred shreds of impression received from him during their recent growing intimacy. He was a patrician, as she vaguely made him out, a man of wealth, whose family was great. He belonged among people of gentle birth and high attainments. She magnified him so that he was diffused in her imagination, as difficult to comprehend as a mist in the morning air—and as beautiful.

"You make fun of me," she said very deliberately, letting her eyes droop. Then she looked up again suddenly and continued, with a certain naive expression of disappointment gathering in her face: "I have been too free with you. Father Beret told me not to forget my dignity when in your company. He told me you might misunderstand me. I don't care. I shall not fence with you again." She laughed, but there was no joyous freedom in the sound.

"Why, Alice—my dear Miss Roussillon, you do me a wrong. I beg a thousand pardons if I've hurt you," he cried, stepping nearer to her, "and I can never forgive myself. You have somehow misunderstood me, I know you have!"

On his part it was exaggerating a mere contact of mutual feelings into a dangerous collision. He was as much self-deceived as was she, and he made more noise about it.

"It is you who have misunderstood me," she replied, smiling brightly now, but with just a faint, pitiful touch of regret or self-blame lingering in her voice. "Father Beret said you would. I did not believe him, but—"

"And you shall not believe him," said Beverley. "I have not misunderstood you. There has been nothing. You have treated me kindly and with beautiful friendliness. You have not done or said a thing that Father Beret or anybody else could criticize, and if I have said or done the least thing to trouble you I repudiate it—I did not mean it. Now you believe me, don't you, Miss Roussillon?"

He seemed to be falling into the habit of speaking to her in English. She understood it somewhat imperfectly, especially when in an earnest moment he rushed his words together as if they had been soldiers he was leading at the charge step against an enemy. His manner convinced her even though his diction fell short.

"Then we'll talk about something else," she said, laughing naturally now and retreating to a chair by the hearthside. "I want you to tell me all about yourself and your family, your home and everything."

She seated herself with an air of conscious aplomb and motioned him to take a distant stool.

There was a great heap of dry logs in the fireplace, with pointed flames shooting out of its crevices and leaping into the gloomy, cavellike throat of the flue. Outside a wind passed heavily across the roof and howled in the chimney top.

Beverley drew the stool near Alice, who with a charred stick used as a poker was thrusting at the glowing crevices and sending showers of sparks aloft.

"Why, there wouldn't be much to tell," he said, glad to feel secure again. "Our home is a big old mansion named Beverley Hall, on a hill among trees and half surrounded with slave cabins. It overlooks the plantation in the valley."

"I know," she continued, "that some time, somewhere, to a very dear person, I promised that I never, never, never would pray any prayer but that, and I remember almost nothing else about that other life, which is far off back yonder in the past. I don't know where—sweet, peaceful, shadowy, a dream that I have all but lost from my mind."

Beverley's sympathy was deeply moved. He sat for some minutes looking at her without speaking. She, too, was pensive and silent, while the fire sputtered and sang, the great logs slowly melting, the flames tossing wisps of smoke into the chimney still booming to the wind.

"I know, too, that I am not French," she presently resumed, "but I don't know just how I know it. My first words must have been English, for I have always dreamed of talking in that language, and my dimmest half recollections of the old days are of a large, white house and a soft voiced black woman, who sang to me in that language the very sweetest songs in the world."

"But I can't," she replied, with child-like frankness, "for I don't know where I was born nor my parents' names nor who I am. You see how different it is with me. I am called Alice Roussillon, but I suppose that my name is Alice Tarleton. It is not certain, however. There is very little to help out the theory. Here is all the proof there is. I don't know that it is worth anything."

She took off her locket and handed it to him.

He handled it rather indifferently, for he was just then studying the fine lines of her face. But in a moment he was interested.

"Tarleton, Tarleton," he repeated. Then he turned the little disk of gold over and saw the enameled drawing on the back, a crest clearly outlined.

He started. The crest was quite familiar.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded in English and with such blunt suddenness that she was startled.

"Where did it come from?"

"I have always had it."

"Always? It's the Tarleton crest. Do you belong to that family?"

"Indeed I do not know. Papa Roussillon says he thinks I do."

"Well, this is strange and interesting," said Beverley, rather to himself than addressing her. He looked from the miniature to the crest and back to the miniature again, then at Alice.

"I tell you this is strange," he repeated, with emphasis. "It is exceedingly strange."

Her cheeks flushed quickly under their soft brown, and her eyes flashed with excitement.

"Yes, I know." Her voice fluttered; her hands were clasped in her lap. She leaned toward him eagerly. "It is strange. I've thought about it a great deal."

"Alice Tarleton; that is right. Alice is a name of the family. Lady Alice Tarleton was the mother of the first Sir Garnett Tarleton who came over in the time of Yardley. It's a great family, one of the oldest and best in Virginia." He looked at her now with a gaze of concentrated interest, under which her eyes fell. "Why, this is romantic," he exclaimed, "absolutely romantic! And you don't know how your name came by this locket? You don't know who was your father, your mother?"

"I do not know anything."

"And what does M. Roussillon know?"

"Just as little."

"But how came he to be taking you and caring for you? He must know how he got you, where he got you, of whom he got you. Surely he knows?"

"Oh, I know all that. I was twelve years old when Papa Roussillon took me, eight years ago. I had been having a hard life, and but for him I must have died. I was a captive among the Indians. He took me and has cared for me and taught me. He has been very, very good to me. I love him dearly."

"And don't you remember anything at all about when, where, how, the Indians got you?"

"No." She shook her head and seemed to be trying to recollect something. "No, I just can't remember. And yet there has always been something like a dream in my mind which I could not quite get hold of. I know that I am not a Catholic. I vaguely remember a sweet woman who taught me to pray like this: 'Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.'"

And Alice went on through the beautiful and perfect prayer, which she repeated in English with infinite sweetness and solemnity, her eyes uplifted, her hands clasped before her. Beverley could have sworn that she was a shining saint and that he saw an aureole.

"I know," she continued, "that some time, somewhere, to a very dear person, I promised that I never, never, never would pray any prayer but that, and I remember almost nothing else about that other life, which is far off back yonder in the past. I don't know where—sweet, peaceful, shadowy, a dream that I have all but lost from my mind."

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